DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 922 CG 400 197

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TITLE Grandparenting: Using Pictures To Transform the Group.
PUB DATE [83]
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the Western Gerontological Society (Albuquerque, NM, April 16-20, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Programs; Affective Behavior; Grandchildren; *Grandparents; *Group Activities; Group Dynamics; Interpersonal Communication; *Interpersonal Relationship; Older Adults; *Parent Education; *Photographs; Program Descriptions
IDENTIFIERS PF Project

ABSTRACT

The importance of the grandparent-grandchild relationship can be used effectively in group work with the aged by using pictures of grandchildren to stimulate personal interaction. Participants are asked to bring pictures of their grandchildren, great-grandchildren, or surrogate grandchildren to a two-hour training session on grandparenting. During the session, they share these pictures with the leaders and with other participants. After the sharing, a discussion of grandparenting ensues which focuses on grandparent role models, styles of grandparenting, grandparent "traps," and the significance of grandparenting. Among the benefits of using pictures are: (1) participants are given an opportunity to exhibit pride and bolster self-esteem; (2) participants engage in structured reminiscing; (3) kinship relationships may be discovered; (4) group interaction is facilitated; (5) the group is transformed from a passive to an active group; (6) the group becomes more cohesive; (7) participants receive and give one-on-one attention; and (8) leaders can gain additional insight into individuals. This technique of using pictures or objects to facilitate sharing among group members can be used with any age group. (DC)

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GRANDPARENTING: USING PICTURES TO TRANSFORM THE GROUP

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GRANDPARENTING: USING PICTURES TO TRANSFORM THE GROUP

Abstract

The sharing of pictures of grandchildren is an effective group work technique with older people which provides mental stimulation, transforms passive groups into active ones, creates new bonds among people and offers the leader additional insight into the social histories of participants. The results are applicable to other groups.

GRANDPARENTING: USING PICTURES TO TRANSFORM THE GROUP

Grandparents and their willingness to brag about their grandchildren have been the focus of many jokes, even a few bumper stickers. The propensity of grandparents to discuss their grandchildren ad nauseam represents a stereotyped view of grandparents. In spite of the jokes, the significance of the grandparent - grandchild relationship has been examined from various perspectives. Styles of grandparenting have been identified,[1] the influence children exert upon the grandparent - grandchild relationship has been studied,[2] and the sociological importance of grandparents has been discussed.[3,4,5]

Grandparenting Session

The importance of the grandparent - grandchild relationship can be effectively used in group work with the aged. In rural, congregate nutrition sites, the use of pictures of participants' grandchildren has transformed the groups. Instead of sitting and talking with the same neighbors until the meal is served, individual participants mingle and freely share information with each other. Their daily routine of minimal interaction with others at the meal site has been broken and new ties have been established with other senior citizens. The technique which will be described has been successfully used with individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds.

A two hour training session on grandparenting is taught as part of a ten hour course, "Adventuresome Living at 60+."[6] The session has also been conducted as a unit by itself. A team consisting of a social worker and an educator conduct the session although it could be taught by only one person. By utilizing two leaders more individual attention can be given to participants, group process is facilitated in large groups, and the pace of the group can be quickly and easily changed. The session has been taught with

and without using the pictures of grandchildren. Group response to the format with the pictures is better in terms of the amount of interpersonal sharing, the amount of movement around the room, the number of individuals who are actively involved in the session, and in the atmosphere that pervades the session.

Before the session on grandparenting is taught, participants are asked to bring pictures of their grandchildren or great-grandchildren. The definition of a grandchild is broadened to include children to whom the older people feel close, surrogate grandchildren. Experience has taught the leaders to stipulate that the pictures will be shared but will not be kept by the leaders. The formality of giving the training participants an assignment, to bring pictures, not only serves to insure that the proper teaching aids will be available, but it also gives participants something to anticipate. The bringing of pictures provides participants with an opportunity to make a tangible contribution to the session. Instead of always being on the receiving end, of having trainers responsible for all of the content and preparation, the older people assume an important role in the training session.

Once the session begins, participants share pictures of their grandchildren with the leaders and with other participants. This unstructured sharing usually begins as soon as three or four participants arrive, their eagerness makes sharing spontaneous without a formal agenda and structured exercises to initiate the activity. After leaders and participants have looked at each other's pictures, a discussion of grandparenting ensues. The discussion focuses upon grandparent role models, styles of grandparenting, grandparent "traps," and the significance of grandparents.

Results

The use of pictures of grandchildren benefits both the older people and the leaders. There are three major benefits older people derive from this exercise.

1. Sharing pictures of grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and even great-great-grandchildren is a method for exhibiting pride and for bolstering self-esteem. Obviously, the older people are proud of their offspring. There is a pride, a feeling of self-worth in having great-grandchildren or even great-great-grandchildren. In a society that values economic productivity and youth, the opportunity to show pictures of grandchildren, of an extended family, capitalizes on a major source of pride for older people. The pictures also allow participants to show each other and the leaders how they looked ten or twenty years earlier. Sometimes pride is evident as the older people say, "This is how I used to look."

2. The pictures offer an opportunity for structured reminiscing. While looking at each other's pictures, participants make such remarks as, "That's you wife? I used to play with her." Memories are stirred, new ties to each other are established through the sharing of pictures. Participants can feel closer to each other as a mutual past, or a common bond, is identified.

3. Through the sharing of pictures of grandchildren, kinship relationships between participants may be discovered. In one session, two participants realized their grandchildren had married into the same family.

From a leadership perspective there are additional benefits to using this group activity. It provides a non-threatening, spontaneous vehicle for

facilitating group interaction. In the process of sharing pictures, older people voluntarily move outside their usual circle of acquaintances, they cross social and economic boundaries. The group can easily be transformed from a passive group to an active group. Simultaneously, the atmosphere changes from one of reservation and ambivalence to one of warmth and friendliness. Another major benefit is that the group becomes more cohesive as individuals share more of themselves and learn more about the other participants. They know something personal about each other; sometimes commonalities are discovered.

This activity provides individual benefits for the leader and participants. The older people receive one-to-one attention from the leader and from other participants as pictures of grandchildren are shared. The older people also have the experience of giving one-to-one attention to peers. That kind of interaction is markedly different from the prevailing patterns at numerous meal sites. It is an exception when individual attention is given in the absence of a crisis or of an application for a service.

Another major result of this activity is that the leader can gain additional insight into individuals. In the sharing of pictures, the older people usually offer comments pertinent to family history and the significance of various relationships. Some individuals use the assignment as an opportunity to bring pictures of spouses or children. Milestones in families are occasionally revealed as participants share. The pictures may reveal where participants have lived or traveled, where their family members live now, how many family members have died, what significant times the family celebrated, the number of marriages, and other such identifying information. Thus, the leader is given a more complete social history of individuals without using an interview schedule.

Application

The use of pictures of grandchildren is a viable technique for group work with older people. It accomplishes multiple purposes in a very easy, non-threatening way. The technique can be successfully used with groups from various socio-economic backgrounds and in diverse settings. The program described here is only one example of the applicability of the technique. It is conceivable that other types of pictures or even objects, such as prized possessions or something old, could be used to achieve the same results. Grandchildren as a topic was chosen because almost everyone has pictures of grandchildren or adopted grandchildren. It was also chosen because of its popular appeal and hence, no resistance to the activity. The content following the activity was designed to affirm the rights of grandparents and to underscore the importance of that role. Another objective was to enhance the self-esteem of the older participants.

This technique, using pictures or objects brought by participants to precipitate individual sharing among group members, can be used with groups of any age. This exercise provides mental stimulation, creates a receptive audience for an educational topic, has almost unanimous participation even by very shy or passive individuals, and supplies the group leader with additional insight into the social histories of participants. It has been one of the most effective techniques for facilitating group process among older people that the leaders have used. Grandparents and grandchildren form an important bond. That relationship can be used as a tool in augmenting and creating friendship bonds among older people.

Notes and References

[1]Bernice L. Neugarten and Karol K. Weinstein, "The Changing American Grandparent," in Bernice L. Neugarten, ed., Middle Age and Aging (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 280 - 285.

[2]Joan F. Robertson, "Interaction In Three-Generation Families, Parents as Mediators: Toward a Theoretical Perspective," International Journal of Aging & Human Development, 6 (1975), pp. 103 - 110.

[3]Margaret Mead, "Grandparents As Educators," Saturday Evening Post, (March, 1977), pp. 34 - 39.

[4]Joan F. Robertson, "Significance of Grandparents, Perceptions of Young Adult Grandchildren," The Gerontologist, 16 (April, 1976), pp. 137 - 140.

[5]Vivian Wood and Joan Robertson, "The Significance of Grandparenthood," in J. Gubrium, ed., Time, Roles and Self in Old Age (New York: Behavioral Publications, 1975).

[6]This program is conducted under the auspices of the River Region Personal Growth Program of the Mental Health Association for Greater Baton Rouge.